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ABSTRACT

This fourth in a four-part series on why academic achievement gaps exist describes the Minority Achievement Committee scholars program at Shaker Heights High School in Cleveland, Ohio, a powerful antidote to the achievement gap between minority and white and Asian American students. It explains the need to break down stereotypes about academic achievement (e.g., that achieving academically is "acting white") and the importance of providing high quality teachers. It suggests that even well-trained teachers need manageable classes and notes that many high-achieving students from all racial and ethnic groups can benefit from extensive formal and informal supplementary educational opportunities. Factors outside school, including household income and parents' education, can predict school success. Low-income and minority parents need to be empowered to participate in their children's education. Curbing television viewing time can also help students succeed. In one Texas district, test scores for minority students have soared, mainly due to the district's refusal to accept excuses for differential achievement. The district offers preschools emphasizing English and oral language skills, separate schools for 9th graders, routine intervention for needy students, teacher training, student support, and challenging curriculum. Heavy emphasis is placed on preparation for state tests. (SM)

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ED 458 337

LIFTING MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT: COMPLEX ANSWERS THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

PART FOUR OF A FOUR-PART SERIES

EDUCATION WEEK, v. 19 n. 30

April 5, 2000

Debra Viadero and Robert C. Johnston

Editorial Projects in Education

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SPECIAL REPORTS

March 2000-April 2000

The Achievement Gap

About 3.4 million students entered kindergarten in U.S. public schools last fall, and already, at the dawn of their educational careers, researchers foresee widely different futures for them. Whether they are white, black, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian-American will, to a large extent, predict their success in school, whether they go to college, and how much money they will earn as adults. Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education. In this four-part series, *Education Week* asks: Why do achievement gaps persist?

This project is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

Part One:"Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement," March 15, 2000. After decades of school desegregation efforts, during which the gap between blacks and whites closed substantially, progress has stalled. At the same time, the greater diversity of the school population and the rapid growth of the Hispanic population and other ethnic groups have reshaped the problem with a more complex set of issues. Includes:

- "Views Over the Gap";
- "As the U.S. Hispanic Population Soars, Raising Performance Becomes Vital"; and
- "Who Is 'Asian'? Cultural Differences Defy Simple Categories."

Part Two: **"Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations,"** March 22, 2000. If the researchers studying the reasons why black and Hispanic students continue to trail non-Hispanic whites in academic achievement were pressed to say one thing for certain about their work, it might be this: The usual explanations aren't good enough. Includes:

- "In L.A.'s Koreatown, a Relentless Focus on Schooling."
- "Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified or Less Experienced."

Part Three:"Minority Gaps Smaller in Some Pentagon Schools," March 29, 2000. Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

Part Four: "Lifting Minority Achievement: Complex Answers," April 5, 2000. The Minority Achievement Committee is Shaker Heights' best-known antidote to the nagging academic achievement gap that separates black and Hispanic students from their white and Asian-American counterparts here and in schools nationwide. Includes:

- "In a Texas District, Test Scores For Minority Students Have Soared."

Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

April 5, 2000

Lifting Minority Achievement: Complex Answers

By Debra Viadero and Robert C. Johnston
Education Week

Shaker Heights, Ohio

Last of a four-part series

Once a month or so, a group of African-American juniors and seniors at Shaker Heights High School trades T-shirts and jeans for dress shirts and ties.

The Achievement Gap

The buttoned-down attire is meant to strengthen the message these young men want to send to their younger, less studious schoolmates in this integrated Cleveland suburb. Look at us, they are saying: We are black, we are smart, and we are proud.

The Minority Achievement Committee, or MAC scholars program, is Shaker Heights' best-known antidote to the nagging academic achievement gap that separates black and Hispanic students from their white and Asian-American counterparts here and in schools nationwide. On average, they start school trailing behind white and Asian children and never catch up, lagging on national tests in every subject—sometimes by four grade levels.

Two of the schools are new this year. Two are in their second year. While it's too early for trend data, early numbers show that fewer 9th graders are getting pregnant, and that the dropout rate is declining.

Another of Aldine's novelties is Anderson Academy. Located in a mostly low-income, African-American area of the district, the popular fine-arts magnet school serves 607 children in grades 1-3.

Under a federal desegregation order in place since 1978, Aldine must meet a court's mandates to prevent racial isolation in its schools. To attract Hispanics and whites, Anderson Academy offers ballet, violin, tap dancing, and other arts-related classes, and what educators there say is an aggressive approach toward keeping students on track.

"When we see Susie struggling, big caution lights flash," said Principal W.C. Wilson. "We meet with parents, put together a plan, and get the grade going in the other direction." About 75 students receive tutoring in the morning before school.

"It may seem extreme, but if someone can't read, nothing is too extreme," Ms. Wilson added. "If they can't read by 3rd grade, things are really going bad."

Test-Crazy?

It takes little time for a visitor to Aldine to see the heavy emphasis that is placed on preparation for state tests.

Computer programs scroll through lists of practice questions. Printers spit out scores for teachers to review. Timed practice quizzes help students prepare for the real thing.

"Teachers are also starting to complain that it's too much," school board member Emmett Hill said.

Wanda Bamberg, the executive director of curriculum and instruction for Aldine, agreed that schools can spend too much time preparing for tests. But, she said, it would be morally wrong not to give students the help they need to pass the high-stakes exams.

Ms. Kujawa, the deputy superintendent, said there's a reason why the district urges students to score beyond passing levels on the state tests. Just one year into their push to improve, TAAS pass rates shot up, she noted. Unfortunately, separate exams of grade-level work were flat. Today, the district's goal is 15 points higher than the passing mark, which is considered at or near grade level.

"We received great accolades, but the grade level didn't move. We started to focus on grade-level skills," Ms. Kujawa said. "Now when kids don't achieve, we sit down and ask principals what happened. 'Why did that happen? What is your plan?'"

On the Web

Learn more about the Aldine school district.

National Assessment of Educational Progress, also called "The Nation's Report Card," tracks achievement of students in fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades, in a variety of subjects.

PHOTOS: Martin Cortes, a 3rd grade teacher at Worsham Elementary School, doesn't allow his minority students to fall behind.
—David Fahleson
Demetra Skinner, a math teacher at Hambrick Middle School, notes that students now have 94 minutes of math every day.
—David Fahleson

A new sense of urgency about the problem is prompting educators and policymakers around the country to try a variety of tactics, some quite costly, to narrow the academic disparities dividing racial and ethnic groups. Class sizes are getting trimmed, teachers are receiving special training, and preschool programs for minority children are expanding.

Schools are opening access to high-level classes and cajoling more minority students into taking them. Districts are shopping for schoolwide-improvement models, and policymakers are raising the academic bar for students and teachers.

In Houston, educators even bargained with local real estate companies to align the terms of apartment leases to match the school year so that children's educations wouldn't be disrupted when families moved. But no one knows for sure which of those methods work best.

"Some strategies for investing resources in disadvantaged children are substantially more productive than others," writes L. Scott Miller in his 1995 book on the subject, *The American Imperative* ."There is little evidence that any existing strategy can close more than a fraction of the overall achievement gap."

Part I **"Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement,"** *March 15, 2000* : Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education.

Part 2 **"Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanations,"** *March 22, 2000* : Why do the achievement gaps persist? Some blame it on teachers; others say too much TV. In a Korean-American community, parents take no chances when it comes to their children's education.

Part 3 **"Minority Gaps Smaller in Some Pentagon Schools,"** *March 29, 2000* : Schools run by the U.S. Department of Defense for children of military families may offer lessons on how to raise the achievement of low-income minority students.

•**Part 4** *April 5, 2000* : There are no sure answers, but some experts say better teaching, smaller classes, the right schoolwide improvement program, and fairer allocation of resources can shrink achievement gaps. A Houston-area district has some answers of its own.

Coverage of urban education is supported in part by a grant from the George Gund Foundation.

That, scholars and minority advocates say, is why solving the problem requires combining strategies and mobilizing resources at every location along the path to adulthood: homes, neighborhoods, college campuses, and, perhaps most important, K-12 schools.

"Just because schools didn't cause the problem doesn't mean they can't solve it," said Meredith Phillips, a co-editor of *The Black-White Test-Score Gap* , a 1998 book on the subject.

What's more, some advocates say, if public schools can't solve the problem in this era of increasing school choice, minority families may be increasingly inclined to look elsewhere.

Breaking Stereotypes

The achievement gap spans socioeconomic boundaries, cropping up in cities, in rural towns, and in well-to-do suburbs like Shaker Heights.

A 1996 study in this 5,600-student district found some troubling achievement disparities. While blacks constituted more than half the enrollment at Shaker Heights High at the time, they accounted for fewer than 10 percent of the top-achieving students, but 90 percent of those at the bottom.

"There shouldn't be an achievement gap," said Audie Simon, a senior in Shaker Heights High's MAC scholars program, created by students 10 years ago with strong support from the district. "Because there is, we've all got to put our heads together to make a change."

He and his fellow scholars are walking arguments against a peer culture that sometimes belittles academic success. Studies since the 1980s have identified a tendency among some African-American students to accuse high-achieving black students of "acting white"—especially if they also use standard English or associate with white classmates.

"A lot of black kids have in mind that we just got to go to school and get our C's and D's," said MAC scholar Jaronn Lawson. "If we could just break that perception, they'd see there is no such thing as 'acting white' or 'acting black.'"

To change those attitudes, the scholars work as nags and mentors to underachieving 9th and 10th grade African-American males. The younger students, known as "potential scholars," start out with less than a C average. If they can push their GPAs into the B-plus or A-minus range, they may become eligible to enter the elite ranks of the MAC scholars. A similar program began three years ago for girls.

"I see these people, they're making it. They're minorities, and their GPAs are high," said Justin Priest, a "potential scholar" who's in 10th grade. "I think I could just work hard and buckle down, and I could do the same as they are." Mr. Priest's GPA, in fact, inched up from 1.48 last year—roughly a D-plus—to 1.71, or a C-minus, the first semester of this school year.

Need for Research

Making it cool to be smart is a strategy that may be catching on nationwide. High schools in Detroit, Evanston, Ill., and other cities around the country all have student-grown clubs much like the MAC scholars. On the national level, the National Urban League two years ago created the Thurgood Marshall Achievers, an honor society for black students, male and female, in grades 3-11. The Lake Success, N.Y.-based Institute for Student Achievement is a growing nonprofit organization that brings groups of professional educators into schools to augment existing services. One of the group's strengths is that it envelopes at-risk students in a network of support that focuses on academic and personal improvement.

"The program takes you out of the mainstream and helps you concentrate," said Kimberly Ferguson, a 24-year-old graduate student at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Va. As a high school student in New York City, she was part of the institute's program. "We had all the same goals," she recalled. "We sat down together, and we developed study habits."

But solid research on programs that try to point disadvantaged students toward college is lacking, said Patricia Gándara, a researcher at the University of California, Davis. She found, however, that the most successful programs provide careful monitoring and guidance and target a particular racial or ethnic group.

Ultimately, all such programs have to encourage more minority students to take the tougher academic courses in which they are badly underrepresented now. Studies show that the biggest predictor of whether young people will go on to earn bachelor's degrees is the academic rigor of their high school coursework.

Some urban schools, though, do not offer a full menu of Advanced Placement classes and other challenging courses. And the general instruction those schools provide can be thin gruel compared with the meatier academic fare at well-off schools.

To force schools to provide better-quality instruction for all, Texas in 1994 began a statewide accountability system that requires schools to go beyond raising students' overall average scores on state exams. Texas schools have to show separately that the average scores of their white, Hispanic, and African-American students are all increasing. If not, schools face the threat of a state takeover.

As a result, the percentages of black and Hispanic students passing the state exams grew by 31 percent and 29 percent, respectively, between 1994 and 1999. The passing rate for white students, in comparison, rose by a little over 18 percent. Some school systems, such as the Aldine Independent School District, are close to eliminating the gaps in some schools.

The Texas approach is one of the most widely cited in the country for addressing lingering problems with minority achievement. But that approach, which also requires students to pass a high school exit test to graduate, is not without its detractors. The graduation test was

unsuccessfully challenged in federal court by Hispanic advocacy groups and Hispanic students who had been denied diplomas. They contended that the test violated the constitutional and civil rights of non-Asian minorities because the percentages of those students passing the tests were still disproportionately low.

Texas' experience and that of other states, such as Massachusetts and North Carolina, suggests that raising standards with high-stakes tests presents a trade-off in the campaign to improve minority achievement. While test scores may rise, so, too, could the numbers of blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans who are "pushed out" of school.

If students are going to be punished for failing, minority advocates say, schools should first make sure that they provide equal educational opportunities for all.

"They have gone about the process of raising standards in an ass-backwards way," said Hugh B. Price, the president of the National Urban League and an outspoken advocate of efforts to raise minority achievement. "Students need more time on task [and] better teaching," he added. "We're not talking about that and we are facing challenges."

Studies show that students in schools with high minority enrollments tend to have teachers who are less qualified than their counterparts elsewhere. ("Students in Dire Need of Good Teachers Often Get the Least Qualified or Less Experienced," March 22, 2000.)

Research showing that good teachers make lasting imprints on student achievement is prompting states and districts to raise requirements for new teachers and beef up professional development.

Class Size, School Size

Even well-trained teachers need manageable classes, however. When Tennessee undertook a statewide experiment in the 1980s to reduce class sizes in the early grades, researchers were pleasantly surprised to learn that while all students learned more in classes of 13 to 17 students, the benefits were greatest for minority students. After kindergarten, the gains black students made in smaller classes were typically twice as large as those for whites.

Similar results have emerged in Wisconsin, where a smaller experiment to limit class sizes in kindergarten through 3rd grade to 15 pupils has been under way for four years. During the 1997-98 school year, researchers found, the black-white test-score gap in program classrooms shrank by 19 percent. In regular-size classrooms, the gap grew by 58 percent.

"That's a good example of something that not only raises all kids' achievement, but also fuses the gap because it raises lower-performing kids' achievement more," said Ms. Phillips, an assistant professor of policy and sociology studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Other research has shown that smaller schools are also effective in raising the achievement of minority students. Some states and districts are turning to "whole school" programs with documented success at improving minority achievement. Two such programs—Success for All, which focuses on teaching reading to disadvantaged students, and the School Development Program, aimed at forging relationships between school staff members and parents and at promoting social as well as academic development—have won high marks for effectiveness from two different national panels.

But research on the vast majority of comprehensive models for school improvement is more mixed. Even less is known about the effectiveness of popular supplemental programs, such as after-school tutoring, Saturday schools, and summer enrichment programs.

"One thing we do know, however, is that many of the high-achieving students from all racial and ethnic groups are beneficiaries of extensive formal and informal supplementary educational opportunities over time," write the members of a task force organized by the

College Board to look at minority achievement. Korean immigrant families in Los Angeles, for example, use such programs to create what some call "a parallel education system" for their children.

"None of us has achieved systemic success," said Thomas Fowler-Finn, the superintendent of the Fort Wayne, Ind., schools. He leads a network of 27 urban school systems formed last year to collaborate on eliminating academic disparities. "We've all achieved success in limited areas."

'It Begins With Data'

Fort Wayne's efforts reflect a trend by urban school systems to measure the success of reform efforts against the goal of narrowing achievement gaps.

The 30,000-student district began by taking a new look at race. "The goal had been to reach integration, but there were no goals to reach achievement," said Mr. Fowler-Finn. "We are now at the second goal, where the question of achievement must arise."

The district has shrunk the disparities in graduation and dropout rates in recent years, but white and black students remain separated by 30 or more percentage points on some exams.

In an effort to narrow those differences, the district has begun examining achievement-gap trends, as well as disparities in disciplinary action and differences by race on student surveys of school climate. An intense focus on early literacy, quarterly assessments, and a districtwide core curriculum also have helped push test scores of African-American students up.

Boston has also made closing the achievement gaps between white, black, and Hispanic students a districtwide goal.

In addition to setting high standards in every subject, the district now has five-year improvement goals for each of its 130 schools. The 64,000-student district also reviews achievement by race and gender each year and assigns intervention teams to review low-performing schools.

School leaders have been trained in teacher observation and in using test data to improve instruction. "It begins with data and a willingness to disaggregate data so you know what's happening with different groups of children," said Boston Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant.

Money helps as well. The Boston system will spend $26.5 million by the end of this school year on summer school and other efforts to improve children's skills in the key transitional years of 2nd, 5th, and 8th grades.

"This is starting to take hold," Mr. Payzant said of the effort, which began in 1998. "I'm not naive, though," he added. "It doesn't mean that everyone who says every child can learn is acting on that belief."

The Rochester, N.Y., schools launched an attack on achievement gaps last fall by targeting money for smaller classes in grades K-6, after-school tutoring, intensified teacher recruitment, staff training, and expanded information centers for parents.

Clifford B. Janey, the superintendent of the 38,000-student system, also wants to change the way educators view their jobs to focus more on broader goals. "If employees are fixed on the notion of 90 percent job and 10 percent mission," he said, "the results will not push us to the level of performance kids deserve."

Involving Parents

Research shows that factors outside school, such as household income and parents' education,

can predict school success, too. That is not to say, many experts believe, that schools can wash their hands of those influences.

Pedro Noguera, an education professor and researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that educators and policymakers should get over the often-repeated idea that minority parents don't value educational performance. "Many schools assume that, and then they are off the hook," he said. "I've never heard a parent say, 'I don't want my child to get an education.'"

He argues that low-income parents, especially those from immigrant families, need information in a friendly, trusting atmosphere. Teachers can also help parents by providing clear instructions on what to do with their children, from practicing vocabulary lists to reading certain passages.

"The more specific [the information is], the more likely the parents will be able to provide it," Mr. Noguera added. "And if a child is behind, let parents know."

Perhaps most important, Mr. Noguera contends, is that parents must visit their children's schools. That, he explains, sends the message that what happens in school is important. He offers educators an easy way to get parents to show up: "Anytime you ask kids to perform, parents will come out. Use that as a hook."

Rosetta Moses-Hill, the director of the Allen County Local Education Fund in Indiana, which includes Fort Wayne, has another technique for bringing low-income parents to her agency's Reading Recovery training program. It pays them.

Not only does the nonprofit agency provide babysitting, a meal, and homework assistance for the children, but it also gives parents a certificate for $100 in groceries if they attend the three two-hour sessions.

Some 150 parents have finished the training since it began last fall. "Parents attend all sessions, and we pay dearly for those sessions," Ms. Hill said. "But when they come out, they can identify reading techniques that can help their kids become better readers."

For example, she said, parents are taught not to scold children for missing words or forgetting what they read, and to limit television time. "Well-intended parents can do the wrong thing and make them hate reading," Ms. Hill said.

Help From the States

Curbing television time is also the goal of several children's organizations, including the National Association of Elementary School Principals in Alexandria, Va., and the Child Welfare League of America in Washington. Both organizations have endorsed National TV-Turnoff Week, April 24-30.

The annual event started in 1995 and is sponsored by TV-Free America, a Washington-based advocacy group. According to data compiled by the group, American 12- to 17-year-olds watch an average of 20 hours of television each week, roughly twice the level that some experts say can begin interfering with academic achievement. And black and Hispanic students, on average, watch even more television than their white and Asian-American counterparts.

Schools are also looking to their state capitals for support in closing gaps in achievement. And, with more attention being focused on the social costs and the persistence of those gaps, lawmakers are showing new willingness to talk about race and achievement.

State Sen. Jeanne Hopkins Lucas of North Carolina promised a vigorous discussion this year in her state on differing achievement levels between white and minority students. She and several other legislators recently met with top university officials on the issue.

"There will be a great deal of dialogue," the Democrat said in a recent interview. "We need to ask what universities need to do to better train our children."

With those talks, however, come inevitable debates over remedies and resources, especially for costly but promising ideas such as reducing class sizes, creating smaller schools, and expanding early-childhood programs.

In a recent study, the Santa Monica, Calif.-based RAND Corp. cited the Carolina Abecedarian Project as one of the most promising preschool education models. But the program, which stresses language skills, costs $11,000 per child.

Jim Watts, the vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta, predicts that state lawmakers in his region will tackle questions of minority achievement during this year's legislative sessions simply because the issue is getting easier to discuss. That is a good beginning, he said, even if the tough questions about money lie ahead.

"I think there were possibly well-founded fears a decade ago among black caucus members and legislators that putting this information on the table would reinforce age-old stereotypes about black children and learning," Mr. Watts said. "But this is an era of raised expectations."

On the Web

Learn more about the Aldine school district.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, also called "The Nation's Report Card," tracks achievement of students in fourth, eighth and twelfth grades, in a variety of subjects.

PHOTOS: At Worsham Elementary School in Aldine, Texas, teacher Martin Cortes works with a student. The Houston-area district has made progress in raising test scores of its African-American and Hispanic students.
—David Fahleson
The MAC scholars at Shaker Heights High School in Ohio encourage younger schoolmates to take challenging courses.
—Bruce Zake
Pedro Noguera of the University of California, Berkeley, says low-income parents need more information and help from schools.
—Jane Scherr

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Education Week

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In a Texas District, Test Scores For Minority Students Have Soared

By Robert C. Johnston
Education Week

Aldine, Texas

Five years ago, the passing rates on state tests for students in this sprawling working-class suburb of Houston were separated by chasms of 30 points or more. Whites were at the top. Black and Hispanic students were at the bottom.

Today, those lines are converging on a point at which many black, Hispanic, and white students perform at or near the same academic levels—a rare occurrence in U.S. education. That goal has been reached in some Aldine schools, where black and Hispanic students outperform white peers statewide.

Overall, the most recent tests in grades 3-8 and 10 put Aldine's African-American students 14 points behind the district's whites, and its Hispanics at 11 points back. That's still a big gap, but the disparities are smaller than they are statewide, and Aldine's gaps in the early grades are mostly in the single digits.

Because of those trends, which are stubbornly elusive nationwide, the 50,000-student school system was picked in two separate studies by Texas researchers as being among the best districts in the state for educating black and Hispanic students. It is also the largest district to make the cut in both studies.

"The cultural value in Aldine has shifted so the achievement gaps between kids by ethnicity are not OK," said Linda Skrla, an assistant professor of education administration at Texas A&M University, who took part in the research. "They have stopped accepting excuses for differential achievement."

It hasn't always been that way, acknowledged Nadine Kujawa, the deputy superintendent for instruction here. Six years ago, when the state's new accountability system began to factor minority test scores and attendance rates into highly publicized school ratings, Aldine was forced to take a closer look at itself.

"We really tried to come to grips as a district with the philosophy that all children can learn," Ms. Kujawa said. "You would hear that, but we had to decide if we really believed it, or if we were paying lip service to it."

Charting a Course

One researcher noted that Aldine is striking because the district leaves so little to chance when it comes to student success.

Half of Aldine's 2,400 kindergartners attend district-run preschools that focus on English and oral language skills. And the district has separate schools for its 9th graders—a grade that many experts say is a crucial one.

Assessment and intervention are routine districtwide. "If a student isn't working out with a

teacher, we change them," one principal said.

While principals come up with their own curricular programs, they must draft improvement plans as soon as achievement begins to sag.

All those elements merge at Worsham Elementary School. Here, for example, rookie teachers spend 90 minutes a day, four days a week, in after-school training during their first semesters on the job.

"If we don't do that, they flounder longer," said Principal Holly Fisackerly. "Our job is to get them the best they can be as fast as possible."

Students are also pushed hard. At least two days a week, up to 230 of the school's 810 students attend after-school skills-development courses, which run from 3:30 to 5 p.m. Extra bus service is provided.

Driving Force

Martin Cortes says that such efforts are worth it. He tells his 3rd graders that they will never get A's from him and then score dismal marks on standardized tests—which he says happened to him when he was a high school student in Houston. "I felt dumb. I knew I was falling behind," recalled Mr. Cortes, who is Hispanic. "They had no expectations for me. That's why I teach in a minority district. That's what drives me."

The push seems to be working.

Worsham Elementary's enrollment is 86 percent Hispanic and 88 percent economically disadvantaged; half the students come to school with limited English skills. Nationally, that is a recipe for low achievement.

Last year, though, 98 percent of Worsham's Hispanic 3rd and 4th graders passed the reading part of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, beating the statewide averages for whites in those grades of 97 percent and 94 percent, respectively. The state passing rate for Hispanic 3rd and 4th graders was 84 percent.

The 222 blacks and 712 Hispanics at nearby Hambrick Middle School also post higher TAAS passing rates than their white peers statewide. The school began to improve four years ago when Principal Nancy Blackwell transferred from a local elementary school. She made discipline a priority, paving the way for instructional changes.

Math teacher Demetra Skinner joined Hambrick in 1995 after earning a degree in mechanical engineering. At the time, 37 percent of the school's black students passed the TAAS. In 1998-99, 97 percent of the African-American students passed in math. Ms. Skinner attributes the rise to the fact that students now get 94 minutes of math daily. "They might not all be gods in math, but there's something they can do," she said. "When I see those gaps, my heart goes out to the kids. They're our future. I wonder what's going wrong."

Getting Innovative

Throughout the Aldine district, administrators are trying to respond to parents.

When parents asked the school board to spend money on schools for 9th graders rather than on new high schools, the district built the four 9th grade centers.

Some freshmen worry that the centers are too regimented—students must proceed in lines through the halls, for example—and deny them the freedom they need to prepare for high school. Supporters like the idea of having 9th graders, whose dropout rates are the highest in most schools, spend another year without the distractions of large high schools.